COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
November 10, 2011

DEFOREST WETLANDS RESTORATION

Project No. 04-005-03
Project Manager: Christopher Kroll

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to $1,500,000 to the City of Long Beach for restoration of 39 acres of wetland, riparian and upland habitat, interpretive signs, bicycle staging area and development of trails.

LOCATION: DeForest Basin, City of Long Beach, Los Angeles County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Reservation of Significant Coastal Resource Areas

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EXHIBITS

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31350-31356 of the Public Resources Code:

"The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed one million five hundred thousand dollars ($1,500,000) to the City of Long Beach (City) for the restoration of 39 acres of habitat at the DeForest Basin and related improvements.

The City shall implement the DeForest project mitigation measures contained in the environmental impact report (EIR) and mitigation monitoring and reporting program described below and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 2. The City shall also implement the greenhouse gas reduction measures described in the accompanying staff recommendation and it's Exhibit 3.

Prior to disbursement of Conservancy funds, the City of Long Beach shall submit for the review and written approval of the Conservancy's Executive Officer:

1. A detailed work program, including budget and schedule.
2. The names and qualifications of any contractors to be employed on the project.
3. A sign plan to acknowledge Conservancy funding for the project.
4. Evidence that all permits and approvals for this project have been issued
5. An agreement between the City of Long Beach and the County of Los Angeles allowing the City to construct, operate, maintain, and monitor the project."

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

"Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 8 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the reservation and protection of coastal resource areas.
3. The Conservancy has independently reviewed the environmental impact report for the "Joint Dominguez Gap and DeForest Treatment Wetlands Project" certified by the County of Los Angeles Department of Public Works in November 2005 and revised in December 2005 pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act, and finds no substantial evidence that the project, with the identified measures to avoid, reduce or mitigate the possible significant environmental effects, will have a significant effect on the environment."

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff is recommending that the Conservancy provide a grant of $1,500,000 to the City of Long Beach (City) for the development of an approximately two-mile long riverfront park with wetlands and associated upland habitat, interpretive displays, a bicycle staging area and public access trails on a 39-acre site adjacent to the Los Angeles River. The project site is a flood control detention basin owned and operated by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works (County). The project would, with the adjoining Dominguez Gap basin wetlands, create almost three miles of recreated wetland and related habitat along the Los Angeles River. The DeForest and Dominguez Gap basin projects together would constitute the largest habitat restoration project(s) to date on the Los Angeles River and a very significant step in completing the 52-mile Los Angeles River Greenway.

The proposed project's habitat design focuses on re-creating historical floodplain habitats of the lower Los Angeles River watershed (Exhibit 4). The proposed project would remove non-native trees from DeForest Park in the northern portion of the DeForest Basin. Wetland areas would be created in this area using existing low-flow runoff from storm drains. These wetland areas would act to treat and improve water quality of both these dry season low flows and stormwater that is retained on-site before it is discharged to the Los Angeles River. Other project elements

in this area would consist of trails, including boardwalks, an entrance gate, and interpretive displays focusing on the historical ecology of the region. In the southern portion of the basin, rare historic habitat types such as vernal pools, native grasslands, coastal scrub, and oak-sycamore woodlands would be developed or enhanced. Trails for pedestrians, bicyclists and equestrians would be created as well as a bicycle "waystop" or staging area to connect the park with the adjoining LARIO bicycle trail on the levee next to the river.

This is a project with multiple benefits. These include restoration of 34 acres of degraded habitat - riparian woodland, emergent wetland, native scrub, and vernal pools. The project would create approximately 3.8 miles of accessible trails with ADA-compliant access points at three locations and ADA-compliant parking at one location. The project would result in increased water supply as the new wetlands will retain and infiltrate more of the stormwater flows that currently flow unobstructed to the Los Angeles River. This increased infiltration of up to 15-35 acre feet per year (AFY) will provide additional groundwater to the Alamitos Barrier (barrier to saltwater intrusion) at Dominguez Gap. The project would also result in up to 800-1000 AFY of stormwater and low flow treatment and enhanced retention of approximately 50% of this flow through check structures, wetland basins, and enhanced wetland and riparian habitat. All summer low flows would be treated by retention and infiltration through the new wetland areas and check structures. These low flows currently pool and stagnate. The DeForest Basin currently serves an important function in retaining stormwater prior to controlled discharge to the Los Angeles River at the Market Street Basin. The project would increase the capacity of the basin by 4 acre-feet, increasing stormwater protection to nearby neighborhoods.

Both the DeForest and Dominguez Gap basins were identified as potential sites for wetland restoration in *Wetlands of the Los Angeles River Watershed: Profiles and Restoration Opportunities*, a study prepared by the Conservancy in 2000. The study concluded that providing a representation of the historic distribution of wetlands and related habitat would be very valuable as the Los Angeles River continues to be a major destination on the Pacific Flyway. In addition, the creation of new public open space along the river helps reconnect neighboring communities with the river they've been cut off from since channelization in the 1950s. Much of the river is lined by low-income, park-poor neighborhoods that will greatly benefit from access to new public open space in their communities. While the City as a whole has 5.6 acres of open space per 1,000 residents, the neighborhood adjoining the DeForest Basin has only one acre per 1,000 residents.

The Los Angeles River has been channelized for flood control resulting in the loss of almost all the historic habitat along the river. Since the 1980s, as part of the "rediscovery" of the river, there has been growing interest in recreating some of the natural wetland and riparian habitats that were lost through channelization. Flood detention basins such as the DeForest and Dominguez basins provide natural opportunities for habitat restoration. The County completed the Dominguez Gap project in 2008. The City has now secured almost all the funds needed to construct the DeForest project, including grants from the Natural Resources Agency, Los Angeles County and the Lower Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers and Mountains Conservancy.

Site Description: The project site is a storm water detention basin adjacent to the lower Los Angeles River. Water enters the basin from local storm drains and is pumped into the Los Angeles River by the Market Street Pump Plant. The 39-acre project site is approximately 300

feet wide by 6,600 feet long, extends south from DeForest Park to Del Amo Boulevard and is divided into two sections by Long Beach Boulevard. The DeForest Nature Center is located at the north end of the basin. The northern section supports an extensive non-native woodland, consisting of ornamental landscape trees planted by volunteers during the 1970s. Some native trees are scattered throughout the woodland – California sycamore, Fremont cottonwood, and coast live oak. A four-acre seasonal wetland and riparian woodland is supported by the low flow discharge from storm drains that provide a perennial source of water. Black willow, sandbar willow, and Fremont cottonwood occur in the riparian woodland. The seasonal/emergent wetland supports vegetation dominated by California bulrush and other species of bulrush. The non-native woodland extends about two-thirds of the way south along the basin and changes into ruderal vegetation just north of Long Beach Boulevard. This area south to Del Amo Boulevard is vegetated with non-native plant species including castor bean, mustard, wild radish, and non-native grasses.

Project History: Both the DeForest/Market Street and Dominguez Gap basins were identified as potential sites for wetland restoration in *Wetlands of the Los Angeles River Watershed: Profiles and Restoration Opportunities,* prepared by the Conservancy in 2000. Conservancy staff explored Long Beach's interest in creating wetlands in the DeForest/Market Street Basin at that time. The City's Parks, Recreation and Marine Department was interested in the opportunity, as well as the Water Department, which initially wanted to harness the wetlands to treat water for reuse. In February 2000, the Conservancy authorized a $300,000 grant to Long Beach to conduct a feasibility study. Completed in summer 2002, it demonstrated that wetlands, trails, and new public-use facilities to support passive recreational and educational activities could be developed.

Independently, in February 2001, the County completed a feasibility study for the Dominguez Gap Spreading Grounds and concluded that the spreading grounds could be modified to allow a continuous flow of water to create year-round aquatic habitat for native wetland and riparian plant species. Complementary enhancement of existing trails and access points, as well as construction of new public-use facilities to support recreational activities such as bird watching, nature study, hiking, cycling, horseback riding, and environmental education activities could also be included.

Since the City and the County were ready to conduct design and environmental review for preferred alternatives from their feasibility studies, they agreed to proceed jointly with the next phase. The Conservancy authorized a $400,000 grant to the County in March 2004 for preliminary design for the DeForest/Market Street project and environmental review for both projects. Joint design ensured that the habitat, recreational elements, and infrastructure are complementary across the neighboring basins. The County and the City worked cooperatively to oversee development of preliminary designs for both project sites.

In May 2005 the Conservancy authorized an additional $200,000 grant to the County to complete final design plans for the DeForest project. In 2008, the County completed the Dominguez Gap wetland project and asked to transfer project management to the City for completion of the final design for the DeForest project. Final designs for DeForest were completed in October 2011.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	$1,500,000
Natural Resources Agency	2,500,000
Los Angeles County	2,000,000
River and Mountains Conservancy	791,482
Total Project Cost	$6,791,482

The expected source of Conservancy funds for this project is the FY 08/09 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84). Proposition 84 authorizes the use of funds for projects that prevent degradation of coastal watersheds, protect and restore the natural habitat values of coastal lands, promote access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state and that are consistent with the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. The proposed project which includes restoration of 39 acres in the DeForest Basin, water quality improvements, and development of trails and interpretive facilities is consistent with the provisions of Proposition 84. The project is consistent with the Conservancy's enabling legislation as discussed below. Pursuant to Proposition 84, as the County of Los Angeles will provide a non-state matching contribution to the project, the Conservancy may give priority to this project

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is consistent with Chapter 8 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Section 31350 *et seq*.), regarding reservation of significant coastal resource areas. Section 31350 of the Public Resources Code authorizes the Conservancy to acquire, hold, protect, and use interests in key coastal resource lands, for public use and enjoyment, consistent with the provisions of Division 21. The proposed project would protect and restore a 39-acre area adjacent to the Los Angeles River, located in the Los Angeles River watershed, a significant coastal resource; and would enhance public access and recreation in the area.

Under Section 31352(a), if a public agency or nonprofit organization is unable for financial or other reasons to acquire, hold, protect, or use an interest in real property for purposes specified in Section 31351, the Conservancy may award a grant to that entity. The City of Long Beach has requested Conservancy assistance in funding the proposed project as the City has limited financial resources to implement the project.

The purposes in Section 31351 incorporate the purposes of Division 21, as well as park, recreation, and fish and wildlife habitat. In turn, Division 21 encompasses coastal and marine resource protection (Chapter 5.5), resource enhancement (Chapter 6), and public access to and along the coast (Chapter 9).

Consistent with Section 31351(a), the project will help ensure that the DeForest Basin is reserved for restoration of fish and wildlife habitat and the development of park amenities and trails. This project would implement the recommendations of the DeForest Park Nature Center and Sixth

Street Sites Wetland Feasibility Study. The project is consistent with the Los Angeles River Master Plan, the Greater Los Angeles County Integrated Regional Water Management Plan (IRWMP) and the Long Beach Riverlink Plan.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2007 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective 2B** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will implement a project to enlarge an existing riverfront park to extend two miles along the Los Angeles River in an underserved community. The park provides access to the LARIO Trail, a regional trail connecting inland communities with the Coastal Trail in Long Beach.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective 6B** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will preserve and restore a coastal watershed. The restored area will become part of the Los Angeles River Greenway, a river parkway, which is being developed from the San Fernando Valley to Long Beach.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective 6F** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will implement a project to improve water quality in the Los Angeles River through the creation of new wetland areas that will treat summer low flows and stormwater through increased retention and infiltration before any of this water is discharged into the river and eventually the ocean.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on June 4, 2009, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** Support for the project comes from a range of local and regional groups including the DeForest Neighborhood Association, Los Angeles County Department of Public Works, Friends of the Los Angeles River, and Los Angeles County Supervisor Don Knabe . See project letters (Exhibit 5).
4. **Location:** The proposed project site is located five miles upstream from the mouth of the Los Angeles River. The types of habitats that are the subject of the proposed project existed both within and outside the coastal zone under natural conditions. Channelization and encroachment of urban development resulted in almost total obliteration of these river-associated wetlands and upland habitat. In addition, loss of wetlands throughout the Los Angeles River watershed has put more pressure on those small patches of coastal zone

wetlands and related upland that have been restored or have accreted within the lowest reach of the river. While the project site is outside the very narrow area that is designated as coastal zone at the mouth of the Los Angeles River, it presents a rare opportunity to replace the lost coastal wetland habitat and reduce pressure on existing habitat.

5. **Need:** Conservancy funding is needed to close the gap in funding for the implementation of the proposed restoration project. Without this funding, the project would have to be significantly reduced in scope.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed project would result in the re-establishment of historic wetland and upland habitat along two miles of the Los Angeles River contiguous with another mile of restored habitat at Dominguez Gap to the south. The project would be the largest habitat restoration project on the Los Angeles River to date and would become an important new link in the 52-mile Los Angeles River Greenway.

7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The proposed project is located five miles upstream of the mouth of the Los Angeles River. The project site is unlikely to be impacted by sea level rise.

Additional Criteria

8. **Resolution of more than one issue**: The proposed project encompasses habitat restoration, water quality improvement, and creation of new public access.
9. **Leverage**: See the "Project Financing" section above.
10. **Readiness**: The project is scheduled to begin construction in spring 2012.
11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals**: The Conservancy has been involved in planning for the restoration of habitat at DeForest/Market Basin since the project was identified in the Conservancy's Wetlands of the Los Angeles River Watershed report in 2000. The proposed project will also help realize a regional goal of a continuous 52-mile Los Angeles River Greenway.
12. **Cooperation**: The project has long been an example of local and state agency cooperation involving the City of Long Beach, Los Angeles County Department of Public Works, the Lower Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers and Mountains Conservancy and the Coastal Conservancy. In addition, federal and state resource agencies and neighborhood groups have also contributed to the project.
13. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The proposed project is being designed to incorporate drought-tolerant native vegetation which will lessen the impact of drought and disease. Site amenities (trails, interpretive signs, etc.) have been designed to withstand flood events as the project site is located within a flood control basin. Due to the urban nature of the area, wildfire is not a significant threat to the project.
14. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The City, working with its environmental consultant, has quantified in detail the construction greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that would result from this project (see Exhibit 6). These emissions total 583 tons of CO_2 equivalent. The city and its consultant then devised a list of measures to reduce the GHG emissions, and Conservancy staff augmented the list (Exhibit 3). The city and its

consultant estimate that implementation of these reduction measures will reduce the GHG emissions by ten to twenty percent. These measures, required as part of the Conservancy's proposed authorization, include: use of only California Air Resources Board-certified diesel construction equipment; use of electric and hybrid construction equipment would be encouraged; development of a Local and Sustainable Building Materials Plan; use of native and drought-tolerant plants and temporary irrigation; additional terrestrial carbon sequestration through the creation of new wetlands and forested areas; truck idling times would be minimized as much as feasible; all construction equipment would be maintained and properly tuned; and a carpooling/mass transit plan would be developed by the contractor.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

In December 2005, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works (County), acting as the lead agency under the California Environmental Quality Act, prepared an environmental impact report (EIR) for the DeForest Park Wetlands and Dominguez Gap Project (Exhibit 7). The intent of the joint project is to develop wetlands to provide wildlife habitat, water quality improvement, groundwater recharge, passive recreation, and environmental education, while retaining existing flood-control capacity. Since completion by the County of the Dominguez Gap project in 2008, the City of Long Beach has been implementing the DeForest project. (DeForest is generally referred to in the EIR as Market Street Basin.)

The EIR includes analysis of the potential environmental effects of the joint project (most effects are not differentiated by each of the two projects) and incorporates changes and mitigation measures to address the adverse effects. These potential effects would affect air quality, biological resources, geology and soils, hydrology, and water quality, and produce noise. The EIR also includes a mitigation monitoring and reporting program. With respect to the DeForest project, the City of Long Beach will assume responsibility for assuring that the mitigation measures required by the EIR are properly implemented and monitored.

The mitigation measures direct construction actions to address fugitive dust emissions; worker awareness of sensitive biological resources and protection measures; impacts on breeding birds, including special-status birds; impacts on special-status plants, if present; impacts to burrowing owls, if present; impacts to foraging or migratory birds; soil erosion or loss of topsoil; impact of sediments and pollutants from the project site on surface waters; impacts to water quality from construction activities within the Los Angeles River; and impacts of construction noise on residents in the vicinity of the project. The mitigation measures required by the EIR are addressed in a Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (MMRP) contained in the EIR. For each mitigation measure, the MMRP lists mitigation compliance purpose, monitoring and reporting actions, monitoring phase/schedule, and monitoring agency.

Staff believe that the project, with measures included as mitigation, reduces or mitigates the potentially significantly effects to a less than significant level (as discussed in more detail below).

The potential significant environmental effects identified in the EIR and the corresponding mitigation measures are as follows:

Air Quality

The project's impacts would be limited to fugitive dust emissions released during construction activities including grading and excavation. The mitigation measures adopted as part of the EIR include the following: 1) to prevent excess dust, the project area disturbed by clearing, grading, earth-moving, or excavation operations should be as small as feasible; 2) pregrading/excavation activities should include watering the area to be graded or excavated to minimize fugitive dust; 3) trucks should be required to have their loads covered as required by the South Coast Air Quality Management District; 4) graded and excavated material, exposed soil areas, and active areas of the construction site should be treated to prevent fugitive dust; 5) inactive graded/excavated areas should be monitored at least weekly for dust stabilization and environmentally safe dust control measures should be implemented over portions of the construction site that are inactive for over 4 days; 6) signs should be posted to limit traffic to 15 mph or less; 7) clearing, grading, earth moving, and excavation should be curtailed during periods of high winds to prevent fugitive emissions from impacting adjoining properties; and 8) adjacent streets and roads should be swept at least once per day if soil is removed from the site on these streets and roads.

Biological Resources

Several construction-related activities and on-going operation and maintenance activities could potentially impact existing biological resources. Mitigation measures adopted as part of the EIR include the following: 1) a worker awareness handout that specifies sensitive biological resources, protection measures, and individual responsibilities would be provided to all personnel; 2) vegetation would not cleared until June 15 (if feasible) to avoid impacts on nesting birds; 3) rare plant surveys would be completed prior to any construction activity. If any rare plants are identified, it would be determined if project activities could avoid impacts on the plant(s). If not, such impacts would be minimized or mitigated through plant relocation (if feasible) or topsoil and seed bank protection; 4) preconstruction surveys for burrowing owls. If any are identified, construction would be restricted in terms of distance from owl burrows or, if not possible, the owls would be moved; 5) to avoid impacts on areas used for foraging by birds: a) siting of infrastructure, e.g. trails, lighting, in previously disturbed areas, when feasible, b) lighting would be directional or pointed downward to reduce impact on wildlife, c) no clearing of vegetation until June 15 (if feasible) to avoid impacts on nesting birds. Although the discussion of possible effects on special status wildlife in the EIR is cursory, the past completion of the adjacent Dominguez Gap portion of the joint project, by creating and enhancing habitat, presumably will help to reduce any potential short-term construction effects of the DeForest project on these species.

Geology and Soils

To help reduce construction-related soil erosion impacts, one of more of the following measures would be implemented: 1) disturbed areas would be as small as feasible to reduce dust; 2) pregrading/excavation activities would include watering the area to be graded or excavated before commencement of grading or excavation; 3) trucks would be required to have their loads covered as they leave the construction site; 4) graded and excavated material, exposed soil areas, and active areas of the construction site, including unpaved roadways, would be treated to

prevent fugitive dust; 5) inactive graded/excavated areas would be monitored for dust stabilization; 6) clearing, grading, earth-moving, and excavation would be curtailed during period of high winds to avoid fugitive dust impacting adjacent properties; and 7) adjacent streets would be swept, at least once per day, if soil is carried from the site onto these streets.

Hydrology and Water Quality

To mitigate potentially significant impacts to surface water quality during construction, the following mitigation measure would be implemented: prior to initiation of ground disturbing activity, the County (or their designee) would obtain project approval from the State Water Resources Control Board under the (federal Clean Water Act) National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) General Permit for Discharges of Storm Water Associated with Construction Activity. (A second mitigation measure is not relevant, as it pertains to a water diversion structure that has been removed from the project.)

Noise

Project construction would result in significant impacts because construction would occur in close proximity to residential areas east of the project area. To reduce construction-related noise impacts of the project, temporary noise barriers consisting of acoustical curtains would be used along the west side of work areas, as needed.

Cumulative Impacts

The EIR concludes that the joint project will not have cumulative impacts.

Response to Public Comments

The draft EIR was released for public comments on June 24, 2005. Four comments letters were received during the public comment period. One letter expressed concern about the threat of mosquito-borne diseases, including West Nile virus, as a consequence of the development of new wetland areas as part of the Dominguez Gap and DeForest projects. The final EIR addressed this issue by noting that specific measures have been incorporated into the design and would be implemented in the management of the wetland areas to ensure that mosquito populations are not significantly increased as a result of the creation of the new wetland areas. The draft EIR included a Vector Management Plan which outlines mosquito control and management. Mosquito control was also considered during the design and layout of the wetland areas. Another letter expressed concern about public safety at the project site. The final EIR described design features that were incorporated into the final project design to minimize public safety risks associated with gang activity, drug dealing, etc. Another letter suggested that the project planning be coordinated with the planning for the I-710 Corridor widening especially as that project might impact the West Basin of the Dominguez Gap. The final EIR notes that potential widening of the I-710 was considered during the design of the project.

Conclusion

Conservancy staff has reviewed the draft and final EIR and recommends that the Conservancy find that there is no substantial evidence that the proposed project, as mitigated, will have a significant effect on the environment. Mitigation measures included in the project design, as mitigation requirements in the Mitigation and Monitoring Reporting program, and as required by state and federal law and City ordinances, will reduce impacts to less than significant levels.

Upon approval of the project, staff will file a CEQA Notice of Determination.